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## The Civil War of Images Political Tragedies, Political Iconographies

An officer of the Nazi occupation forces  
visited the painter in his studio and,  
pointing to *Guernica*, asked: ‘Did you do that?’  
Picasso is said to have: answered,  
‘No, you did.’  
— Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Commitment’

What would art-historical analysis look like if its paradigm  
were not the greeting of a friend to a friend, but instead  
a mortal enemy slipping by unnoticed, or signalling  
cryptically to a co-conspirator invisible to us? ... Lulled  
into the illusion that the objects we interpret are our  
friends, we struggle to make sense of enemy pictures.  
— Joseph Leo Koerner, *Bosch & Breughel*

### Introduction

Tragedy has recently emerged as a privileged keyword through which to think the political fate of images, or the fate of political images, in the history of art and media. I am thinking in particular of two projects that make strong claims to reinterpret the history of visual forms from perspectives at once attached to, and variously despondent about, the passionate marriage of politics and poetics – that marriage hailed, under the names of Rimbaud and Marx, by André Breton, and which today is annulled by a quotidian, if spectacular, barbarism. These projects are Georges Didi-Huberman’s political recovery of Aby Warburg’s morphology of the formulas of pathos – in his book sequence *L’Œil de l’histoire* (2009–2016), but also in his remarkable film and video installation at the Palais de Tokyo (co-produced with Arno Gisinger), *Nouvelles histoires de fantômes / New Ghost Stories* (2014) – and T. J. Clark’s re-reading of Picasso’s *Guernica*, in

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an exhibition at the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid co-curated with Anne Wagner, and especially in a catalogue essay on ‘Picasso and Tragedy’. Elsewhere, I have tried to take issue with Clark’s framing of ‘politics in a tragic key’,<sup>1</sup> whereas here I want to explore how the tragic can serve to configure, formally and visually, the constellations of the political.<sup>2</sup>

I will thus move from Didi-Huberman and Clark’s partially divergent inflections of the tragic – as *atlas* and *scene* respectively – to explore it, with the aid of Carlo Ginzburg’s recent work, from the angle of political iconography. This will then be followed by two explorations of how the political element *par excellence* of the tragic sensibility – *civil war*, be it as Greek *stasis*, Roman *bellum civile*, or a ‘global civil war’ – can be the object of iconographic depiction and contestation. First, I will explore the ongoing debate over the interpretation of the frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (which I would like to envisage here, to use a crucial concept from the art historian Joseph Leo Koerner, as a kind of *enemy image*<sup>3</sup>). Second, I will touch on some of the political, semiotic and forensic debates orbiting around the iconic images (and the covert or unwitnessed events) that marked the fateful collapse of Italy’s ‘long 1968’ or ‘red decade’ into the infamous ‘years of lead’ – debates that involved semioticians like Umberto Eco, film-makers like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Elio Petri, as well as a vast and fractious galaxy of militancy, image-work and counterinformation. Though I will not directly address our neoliberal age and its mediascape, I hope that this methodological and conceptual inquiry can shed some light on how and why ‘tragedy’ and ‘civil war’ can become names for our present, but also what they might occlude – indeed, how much the state simulation of civil war, denounced by Toni Negri from prison in the early 1980s,<sup>4</sup> and earlier anatomised by Guy

<sup>1</sup> See Alberto Toscano, ‘Politics in a Tragic Key’, *Radical Philosophy* 180, July-August 2013, pp. 25–34; also available at: <[www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/politics-in-a-tragic-key](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/politics-in-a-tragic-key)> [accessed 14 June 2018].

<sup>2</sup> An earlier and abbreviated version of this paper was delivered at the symposium ‘Constellations of the Political: Media and Representation in the Neoliberal Age’, University of Maryland, 20 April 2018. Many thanks to Mauro Resmini for his engagement and hospitality.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Leo Koerner, *Bosch and Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Toni Negri, ‘Terrorism? *Nein, danke!*’ in: *Diary of an Escape*, trans. Ed Emery (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), esp. pp. 82–3 (‘To destroy the image of civil war’).

Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti,<sup>5</sup> was a crucial component of that creeping epochal *counter-revolution*, that mutation of the planner-state into a crisis-state, which is at the heart of neo-liberalism.

## I. The Tragic Scene, or, The Vanished Fist

At the centre of Georges Didi-Huberman's imposing and compendious series *The Eye of History* lies Atlas, the figure of tragic knowledge that works to anchor Aby Warburg's anthropology of images and provides the *Atlas Mnemosyne*, the unfinished summa of Warburg's method and practice – as well as the chief inspiration behind Didi-Huberman's revitalisation of art history – with its symbol. *The Eye of History* incorporates searching, inventive and erudite explorations of the films of Jean-Luc Godard and Pier Paolo Pasolini, the video-work of Harun Farocki and Brecht's wartime collages – but also Goethe's morphology, the visual evidence of the extermination of European Jews, and the survivals of ancient astrological divination. But Atlas arguably provides *Eye's* most compressed leitmotiv, and it is one presented under the sign of *tragedy*. In his effort to actualize Warburg's method – not least through another remarkable exhibition at the Reina Sofia Museum<sup>6</sup> – Didi-Huberman draws on Nietzsche, Freud, Bataille, Deleuze and Foucault (as well as Warburg's historical and methodological influences) to present the *Atlas Mnemosyne* as a particularly contemporary image-practice, one redolent with political significance.

At its heart, often occluded by an iconographic tradition of which Panofsky and Gombrich are the key luminaries, is an effort, deeply entangled with Warburg's own psycho-political history (his breakdown at the end of World War 1, after having led a collective project to map images and superstitions of the war, admirably dealt with in volume 3 of *The Eye of History*), to provide a kind of sampled order, an *échantillonnage*, of the chaos that defines (following Nietzsche and Georg Simmel) *modern culture as tragedy*. For Didi-Huberman, Warburg has an unmatched capacity to bind morphology and art history to the knowl-

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<sup>5</sup> Guy Debord, 'Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*' (1979), available at: <[www.notbored.org/debord-preface.html](http://www.notbored.org/debord-preface.html)> [accessed 14 June 2018]; Censor (Gianfranco Sanguinetti), *Truthful Report on the Last Chances to Save Capitalism in Italy* (1975), available at: <[www.notbored.org/censor.html](http://www.notbored.org/censor.html)> [accessed 14 June 2018].

<sup>6</sup> See the exhibition catalogue: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back?* (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2010).

edge-through-suffering of what Brecht himself saw as a world out of joint, a *dislocated* world; this is a 'dynamographic' knowledge capable of gleaning how forms are birthed by forces, but also how in these forms and images we find survivals of the past – whether vivifying or mortifying. As a thinker of polarities, Warburg is perennially struggling with the relation between an astral reason and a monstrous disorder. Viewed through the prism of his work, the history of images becomes, in Didi-Huberman's estimation, 'the history of an ever-repeated tragedy between the worst of the *monstra* and the best of the *astra*', 'on the one side, the *tragedy* through which every culture makes show of its own monsters (*monstra*); on the other, the *knowledge* through which every culture explains, redeems or untangles the same monsters in the sphere of thought (*astra*)'.<sup>7</sup> This is a history grounded on a temporal understanding of images shot through with survivals, anachronisms and anticipations, which require (as in Benjamin, Bloch and others) new forms of montage, of assembly – ones also capable of capturing and countering 'the disassembly (*démontage*) of time in the tragic history of societies'.<sup>8</sup>

How does this ancient figure – whose gesture is repeated, at times in 'energetic inversions', across the ages – then serve as the emblem of an art-historical method capable of coping with the politics of the image in catastrophic times? For Didi-Huberman, the presence of Atlas – the vanquished warrior, punished like Prometheus for his rebellious hubris – within Warburg's *Atlas* offers an emblem of how power transfigured into suffering can in turn be transfigured into knowledge. His 'formula of pathos' (or *Pathosformel*, a key methodological invention of Warburg's, also at the heart of Carlo Ginzburg's studies in political iconography) is that of the immobilisation of conflict, the form of the latter's survival, combat immobilised by verticalization<sup>9</sup>; in this *figura sforzata* we find 'the dialectical image par excellence of the relation between power [*puissance*] and suffering, irresistible force and the danger of collapse'.<sup>10</sup> Atlas is here a powerful incarnation of a tragic dictum, from no less than Aeschylus himself, which haunts, in varying ways, all the works explored in *The Eye of History: pathei mathos*, knowledge through suffering. This is a dictum that Fredric Jameson has

<sup>7</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Œil de l'Histoire – Tome 3: Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet* (Paris: Minuit, 2011), pp. 84–5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

transcoded into a Marxist, and, in its own non-melancholy manner, *tragic* register in *The Political Unconscious*:

History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its “ruses” turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force. This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them.<sup>11</sup>

The knowledge of Atlas, which is also Warburg’s knowledge, and the one generated by Brecht, Farocki, Godard and other artists revisited by Didi-Huberman (not least in his own installation work on the politics of lamentation at the Palais de Tokyo), is a disquieting, impure, intimate, abyssal and ‘*tragic* knowledge, a knowledge through contact and pain: everything he knew about the cosmos, [Atlas] drew it from his own misery, his own punishment’.<sup>12</sup> Yet Didi-Huberman also wishes to extract from Atlas a lesson of resistance, not just an aesthetics of lamentation. Or rather, he wants to demonstrate that from (tragic) lament too a politics (of images) may be drawn – in this sense resonating with the compelling pages of Andrea Cavalletti’s *Class* on the nexus of lament and struggle, where the Italian scholar writes, citing both Marx and Benjamin: ‘lament penetrates every sphere and its absence reveals the class enemy even in the words of the neighbour. The most vivid tendencies of lamentation in fact constantly “come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh”. Thus, they “constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers”.’<sup>13</sup> Didi-Huberman himself has put this position forth most emphatically in the curation and catalogue essays for the show *Soulèvements* (Uprisings), where his own writing and image selection is accompanied by new pieces from Judith Butler, Toni Negri, Marie-José Mondzain, Jacques Rancière and Nicole Brenez.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002 [1981]), p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> Didi-Huberman, *L’Œil de l’Histoire – Tome 3*, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Cavalletti, *Class*, ed. Alberto Toscano, trans. Elisa Fiaccadori (Calcutta: Seagull, forthcoming 2018), n. pg.

<sup>14</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman (ed.), *Soulèvements* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

Didi-Huberman transfigures the artistic, political and media archive of 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century revolts and revolutions into an atlas of *gestures*.<sup>15</sup>

At their core is the very gesture of uprising, of rising or lifting up, which is the direct counterpart to the load-bearing tragedy of Atlas, but never simply emancipates itself from it. While an effort to recover, reconstruct and reanimate a desire for emancipation out of the ‘burning memory’ of past struggles, Didi-Huberman’s is also a retrospect that bathes uprisings in the hindsight of catastrophe and defeat, and in the claustrophobias of our present. In a way, it is attention to the emancipatory force and knowledge intrinsic to suffering itself that provides his approach with its distance from the apocalyptic or defeatist tonality of other contemporaries. If, as he puts it in his long catalogue essay for the *Soulèvements* show, ‘Par les désirs (Fragment sur ce qui nous soulève)’, it is *loss* (*la perte*) which raises up the world, then revolt is never vanquished. A similar reflection pertains to the association of power as *puissance* (dichotomised with *pouvoir* and linked instead to *impouvoir*) with *pathos*, with a power to be affected, a passion that is not relegated to the domain of passivity (Atlas’s compressed power is never dissipated, his virtuality of uplift never exhausted).

But this morphology of revolt – notwithstanding the cognitive power of its montage, the beauty of its icons – is also haunted by the *generality* of ‘the tragic’ (as a condition, not a process, project or politics), by the way in which gestures can not only be inverted into opposing contents (as Warburg taught) but also become politically illegible in their analogies. Here a detail, albeit a patent one, can animate our doubt: the cover of the catalogue for *Soulèvements* reproduces (on back and front of the hardback) an image, taken from behind, of two youths lobbing rocks in a demonstration, or riot. The caption tells us these were pictures taken by Gilles Caron (a French photographer who disappeared in 1970 whilst covering wars in Cambodia) in 1969, and that they depict ‘Anti-Catholic riots’. At first, I wondered how a book and exhibition that leans towards the view that all uprisings – *as gestures* – are on the side of the positive desires of

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<sup>15</sup> Here we would need to dwell at some length on the centrality of gesture to Warburg’s *Pathosformel*, but also reference the writings on Brecht on *gestus*, of Agamben’s on gesture as a crucial element of a politics of pure means, but also Evan Calder Williams’s remarkable exploration of the gestures of revolt. See Evan Calder Williams, ‘Seven Gestures of Revolt’, *Europa, Futuro Anterior*. Available at: <europafuturoanterior.com/en/interventions> [accessed 14 June 2018].

*puissance* and not for *pouvoir*, and that the solidarity between these gestures is in their also being gestures of solidarity, could have as its icon a Northern Irish Loyalist riot – one whose political orientation would (to most leftists at least) seem problematic. A quick search revealed instead that these are images from the ‘Battle of the Bogside’ in Derry (Londonderry), where Catholic youths faced up against Royal Ulster Constabulary forces. Anecdotal perhaps, but such an erratum suggests the question: Does an atlas or morphology of political gestures based on the tragic nexus between suffering and uprising really articulate a kind of ‘knowledge’, a political *pathei mathos*?

Clark’s essay ‘Picasso and Tragedy’ prolongs the political orientation of his plea ‘For a Left without a Future’<sup>16</sup> into the domain of art-historical analysis and curatorship. The Reina Sofia exhibition seeks to articulate a different narrative of the painting’s genesis, one attuned to how it was prepared by the stylistic, formal and thematic orientation of Picasso’s work of the early thirties. This curatorial intervention met with considerable contestation in Spain, where its seemingly ‘internalist’ approach was viewed as a problematic deviation from the framing of *Guernica* as the political icon of the Spanish Civil War in the museum’s (admirably assembled) permanent exhibition. Clark and his co-curator Anne Wagner legitimately retorted that their effort was not to replace the historical-political contextualisation of *Guernica*’s prior presentation, but rather to unsettle, by way of counterpoint, the idea of Picasso as having unequivocally responded to the event of the German slaughter with an image of timeless force. But what I am preoccupied with here is the manner in which this curatorial reorientation takes place under the aegis of *tragedy* – more specifically under the banner of A. C. Bradley’s interpretation of tragedy as a unified ‘impression of *waste*’ and an image of the fated collapse of human greatness into destruction and devastation.<sup>17</sup>

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The aim of this effort, like that of Clark’s programmatic essay in the *New Left Review*, is manifestly *contemporary*. Indeed, it is introduced to explain the seeming enigma of *Guernica*’s formidable circulation as an icon of violence in our age of neoliberalism – or, to cite the subtitle of the RETORT intervention to which

<sup>16</sup> T. J. Clark, ‘For a Left with No Future’, *New Left Review* 74, March–April 2012, pp. 53–75.

<sup>17</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1904]).

Clark contributed, *Capital and Spectacle in the New Age of War*.<sup>18</sup> Clark enlists his art-historical virtuosity to unearth, in Picasso's own trajectory – as well as in the profane illumination of his work by the likes of Carl Einstein, Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris (whose essays from *Documents* are incorporated into the catalogue) – the reasons for how and why *Guernica* could endure as 'our culture's Tragic Scene', one that Clark clearly perceives – for ill and good alike – as bereft of an emancipatory *project*. There is a perhaps unintended irony in this effort, namely that the excavation of the elements, motifs and gestures behind *Guernica*'s composition, the painstaking work of art-historical detection, seems at least in part to sanction a *timeless* view of the painting, of the kind that a certain understanding of the 'horrors of war' (popular-frontist first, left-liberal later) strives to convey.

Clark defines the 'tragic scene', of which *Guernica* is the unexampled instance, as 'the moment in human existence ... when death and vulnerability are recognized as such by an individual or a group, but too late; and the plunge into undefended mortality that follows excites not just horror in those who look on, but Pity and Terror – in a mixture that frightens but strengthens'.<sup>19</sup> It is one of the great critical virtues of Clark's essay, and of Clark and Wagner's exhibition, to suggest and to show that *Guernica*'s capacity to both address and transcend its own occasion, and serve as a kind of portable icon of denunciation, has a rather disturbing condition of possibility, namely Picasso's fascination (a term that Clark pointedly traces back to the Latin *fascinus*, erect penis) with sexual monstrosity and violence. This is something that surfaces disturbingly in Picasso's drawings of rape from the early 1930s, as well as in his fall-out with, of all people, Jacques Lacan, triggered by Picasso's plea for the cruel and tragic grandeur of the Papin sisters, whose 'senseless' and eroticised murders were later committed to film by Claude Chabrol. Clark proposes that the path to a politics of tragedy in Picasso is through an identification – itself enmeshed in the darker drives – with monstrosity. To elucidate why Picasso's *Guernica* is the tragic scene of our age would then also be to trace a 'way' – which the itinerary of the exhibition approximates – from 'monstrosity to tragedy'. As Clark insists:

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<sup>18</sup> Iain A. Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> T. J. Clark, 'Picasso and Tragedy', in *Pity and Terror: Picasso's Path to Guernica*, ed. T. J. Clark and Anne M. Wagner (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2017), p. 22.



‘The one must be capable of being folded into the other, lending it aspects of the previous vision’s power’.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, by contrast with Clement Greenberg’s claim that Picasso could not attain *terribilità*, Picasso’s apparently apolitical immersion into the reversible nexus of Eros and Thanatos in the early 1930s could contribute to his singular ability to ‘find a way to make appearance truly terrible, therefore pitiful and unforgivable – a permanent denunciation of any *praxis*, any set of human reasons, which aims or claims to make *what actually happens* (in war from the air) make sense’.<sup>21</sup> Passages such as this already suggest how troubled the relation between the tragic and the political is in Clark, since tragedy appears in and as the failure of project and practice, as a way of bringing formal unity to fractured, ravaged waste – in order, in Clark’s words, to depict a ‘new shape of suffering’. Building on the disquieting amalgam of ‘domesticity and paranoia’<sup>22</sup> that marks his art in the phase immediately preceding *Guernica*, Picasso would give us an ‘existence transfigured by fear’, in which ‘Everything is unknown, and therefore hostile’.<sup>23</sup> This hostility attains crushingly epochal proportions (or rather disproportions) in the age of total war, but Picasso’s ability to shape and form the present *as tragedy* in such a lasting manner would then depend on drawing on a very quotidian horror, and on an identification and fascination with it. *Guernica* can accordingly be approached as ‘a *realization* of horror ... knowing horror obsessively and intimately, dwelling with it, being under its spell, recognizing it as part of the self – and certainly part of the history of one’s time’.<sup>24</sup>

It is unsurprising then that what permits *Guernica*’s endurance as a tragic scene in the age of a ‘left without a future’ is the subtraction of any explicit political symbolism from the painting, in the guise of the raised fist of the fallen soldier which – as testified by Dora Maar’s photographs – is painted out of the painting’s final version. Strikingly, if somewhat improbably, tracing an arc from A. C. Bradley, through Einstein, Leiris and Bataille, to Judith Butler’s latest thinking on the image-politics of grievable life, Clark suggests that: ‘The image of politics *Guernica* ended up proposing [instead of that of heroic communist opposition] was one

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

in which the “affiliation” and “collective resistance” there *in* human “vulnerability” – is what can be shown – understood as a shared tragic fate’.<sup>25</sup> Butler, in a now familiar pairing, is here accompanied by the Hannah Arendt of *On Violence*, improbably read as pitting Georges Sorel’s image-myth of the general strike as a ‘picture of complete catastrophe’ against Frantz Fanon’s supposedly romantic project of violent decolonisation (it would not be difficult to demonstrate how Fanon is a much subtler thinker of bodily and psychic vulnerability and its dialectic with emancipatory violence, but that is for a different paper).

As in Clark’s earlier programmatic call ‘For a Left without a Future’, this melancholy celebration and repetition of the death of emancipation as project is predicated (as I have argued it is in David C. Scott’s related reading of C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins*) on an elision of the intrinsically tragic form that the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers of liberation gave to the communist project – from Sartre to Fanon, Luxemburg to James, Lukács to Césaire. Note here that the effort in this heterogeneous tradition to think violence *from the inside* is precisely what is disavowed by Clark’s unwillingness to reflect on the differences (as well as the fateful interlocking) of war ‘as such’ from civil war or revolution. This is evident, for instance, when he writes that ‘the prominence of war in modernity – and the fear it may be modernity’s truth – is not a matter of more and more (or less and less) actual conflict, but of violence as the *form* – the tempo, the figure, the *fascinus* – of our culture’s production of appearances’.<sup>26</sup>

By way of a politically-enlightening counter to Clark’s tragic scene, I want to turn now to Carlo Ginzburg’s recent study of the genesis of *Guernica* – a study whose Warburgian take on political iconography would seem to align it with Didi-Huberman’s work, but whose political instincts and forensic methodology result in a more pointed critical lesson than the one we can draw from the two contemporary left thinkers of the tragedy of culture with which we’ve begun. Though his approach differs markedly from Clark’s, eschewing catachresis for the sake of formal arguments which, while never short of inventiveness, always

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 55. Our critique of Clark here would need to be prolonged with a necessary critique of Didi-Huberman’s own elision of the revolutionary character of Benjamin’s understanding of politics as ‘the organization of pessimism’, whose own tragic character is not incompatible, indeed it requires, an uncompromising partisanship – in other words, organization does not vanish into pessimism.

find an anchor in precise clues and traces, Ginzburg's text moves through much of the same terrain, most significantly inquiring into Picasso's relation to the intellectuals around *Documents* (chiefly Bataille and Einstein) and exploring the possible rationales for the excision of the explicitly political iconography of earlier versions of the painting (here Ginzburg nicely recalls Picasso's dictum: 'a picture is a sum of destructions'). While seeking the political ambiguity of Picasso's work of the 1920s and 1930s in his relation to classicism rather than in sexualised monstrosity,<sup>27</sup> Ginzburg takes his cue from some of the Spanish painter's less enthusiastic critics to challenge the very ambiguity (rather than forceful universality) of the painting itself. In particular, he cites Anthony Blunt's early dismissal of the painting's lack of political specificity ('the painting is disillusioning. Fundamentally, it is the same as Picasso's bull-fight scenes. It is not an act of public mourning, but the expression of a private brain-storm'), as well as, and more to the point, Timothy Hilton's judgment that 'Guernica is a *vague* painting', and that it would be 'double-talk' to present its iconographic and thematic uncertainties as 'universal'.<sup>28</sup>

The critical, and political, core of Ginzburg's extremely compelling inquiry into the painting's genesis is a kind of echo of Blunt and Hilton's disillusion, and is bluntly phrased: 'In this icon of anti-Fascist art, Fascism is absent'.<sup>29</sup> The absencing of Fascism is particularly evident in the vanishing of the fallen soldier's fist and the mutation of the sun into a lightbulb. With nuance and conviction, Ginzburg traces these either by way of direct influence or resonance to Georges Bataille, whose journal *Documents* had devoted a special issue to the Spanish painter – with articles by Leiris, Einstein and Bataille himself, all of them operating as crucial references for Clark's own analysis. In particular, Ginzburg sees the metamorphosis of the natural sun into a naked lightbulb as an uncannily precise transposition of Bataille's argument, in his eponymous 1930 essay, about a 'rotten sun' replacing the splendid, natural one of a high-artistic tradition, the sun of production giving way to the sun of decay, an argument climaxing in the vision of 'the horror emanating from a brilliant arc lamp'.

<sup>27</sup> This is a theme that also emerges in Clark's earlier *Picasso and Truth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), and is tackled in Malcom Bull's critical review of Clark's book: 'Pure Mediterranean', *London Review of Books* Vol. 36 No. 4, 20 February 2014, pp. 21–23.

<sup>28</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, 'The Sword and Lightbulb: A Reading of *Guernica*', in *Fear, Reverence, Terror: Five Essays in Political Iconography* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2017), p. 216.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

But an even more powerful counter to Clark's melancholy sublimation of *Guernica* is to be found in further evidence of how Picasso may have incorporated Bataille's private mythology into his own, namely the way in which the French philosopher, in a 'Nietzschean Chronicle' roughly contemporary with *Guernica*, deployed his trenchant critique of popular-frontist or humanist anti-fascism in the myth-image of Numantia, the Spanish city that had resisted Roman invasion. Up against the homologous sovereignty imposed by totalitarian states, the only alternative for Bataille was 'the community without a leader, bound together by the obsessive image of tragedy'<sup>30</sup> – in the conviction that a leaderless community could only find its bond in death. Here Ginzburg's unearthing of the Bataillean notes in Picasso's tragic scene can also serve to indicate the potential vacillation of a post-revolutionary politics of vulnerability into a negative anthropology of finitude, whose resources for resistance may be found wanting. As he concludes his essay: 'Bataille's ambiguous critique of the limits of anti-Fascism may throw light on the paradox of *Guernica* – a quintessential anti-Fascist painting from which the Fascist enemy is absent, replaced by a community of humans and animals connected by tragedy and death'.<sup>31</sup> We could ask then, with Ginzburg: is the condition for the appearance of a contemporary, but trans-situational, tragic scene, the erasure of the specific sources of that tragedy, be they fascism, racism or capital? A flattening of social war, imperialist war, civil war onto war *simpliciter*?

## II. Pictures of *Stásis*

Agamben's *Stásis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm* is the slim final volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, published, with some architectonic confusion (it is listed as II.2, originally the designation for *The Kingdom and the Glory*) after the compendious *The Use of Bodies*, which closes if not completes the series. *Stásis* is composed of two seminar presentations on a theme, civil war, which has coursed in and out of Agamben's work, and in those of some of his intellectual and political comrades (namely Tiqqun and The Invisible Committee). Here it is dealt with first in a dialogue with the brilliant historian of *stásis* in Ancient Athens, Nicole Loraux, and then, in the essay from which my remarks here take

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<sup>30</sup> Bataille, quoted in Ginzburg, 'The Sword and the Lightbulb', p. 221.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

their cue, in an attempt to excavate, from an analysis of the 1651 frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, a *philosophical iconology* of civil war.

Agamben's work here is deeply indebted to the scholarly attention recently lavished on the frontispiece, and on the place of the visual in Hobbes's theory of politics, by several scholars, most significantly perhaps the art historian Horst Bredekamp, whose work on the 'Urbild' of the modern state remains the guiding reference.<sup>32</sup> Following Bredekamp, the frontispiece has been the object of investigation by Carlo Ginzburg, in his striking 2008 essay 'Fear Reverence Terror: Rereading Hobbes Today',<sup>33</sup> and, in the same year, in Quentin Skinner's *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*. Where Agamben evokes a yet inexistent science called *philosophical iconology*, Bredekamp and Ginzburg speak with regard to the frontispiece of *political iconography*. In this section, I want to explore some of the iconographic findings and political theses emerging out of this wide-ranging focus on the frontispiece, paying particular attention to the question of how we might think the time and subjectivity of a political interregnum, as a time of unsettled divisions under the shadow of the state.

The frontispiece operates as an emblematic threshold and over-determined allegory of Hobbes's theory of the state. Hobbes participated directly (as he had in the frontispieces of his translation of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* and *De Cive*) in its design (likely by the engraver Abraham Bosse), which is redolent with enigmas, some of which we'll touch on, for instance: What is the meaning of the arrangement of gazes between sovereign and subjects? On what is this 'Mortall God' standing? The question Agamben homes in on is a different one: why is the fortified city over which this 'android' looms – a *rex populus* in which the *rex* is the head, and the *cives* the *corpore* – empty? For Agamben, as he remarks in the brief prefatory note to *Stasis*, the 'constitutive element' of the modern state is *ademia*, the absence of a people. At the same time, civil war – precisely because it is rarely *thought* in political philosophy, which lacks a real

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<sup>32</sup> Horst Bredekamp, *Thomas Hobbes visuelle Strategien: Der Leviathan, Urbild des modernen Staates – Werkillustrationen und Portraits* (Berlin: Akademie, 1999). I quote here from the French translation: *Stratégies visuelles de Thomas Hobbes. Le Léviathan, archétype de l'État moderne : illustration des oeuvres et portraits* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Now in: *Fear, Reverence, Terror*, op. cit.

*stasiology* – is the ‘fundamental threshold of politicisation of the West’.<sup>34</sup> The frontispiece will bring these two theses together.

The fields and city we encounter in the frontispiece are of course not properly speaking empty. Yes, the multitude have been symbolically composed, neutralised and pacified into a people, ‘deported’ we could say, over the horizon. But there are figures in the landscape. In the main, these are soldiers, patrolling both within and without the city. In a recent paper, Magnus Kristiansson and Johan Tralau have argued that far from being a picture of pacification, the frontispiece subtly indicates a state of war – more specifically, as firing from forts and roadblocks indicate, preparations for an invasion from abroad.<sup>35</sup>

A reflection on Hobbes’s place within the horizon of possessive individualism may also want to reflect on the fact that there is no labour taking place in the frontispiece, contrasting greatly with the far less dialectical but more didactic frontispiece of the 1642 *De Cive*, which, following the emblematic literature of Hobbes’s day, produces a stark juxtaposition between an Imperium looking over commodious, ordered and improving labour, on the one hand, and, on the other, an image of Libertas, entirely grounded on the equation between the original state of nature and the contemporary figure of the North American ‘savage’, which stands over a scene in which *stásis* devolves into manhunting. The forgetting of *labour* in Agamben’s diagnosis of *ademia*, which resonates with his subtraction of class from his investigation of *stásis*, certainly calls for further investigation.

Following a detail stressed by Francisca Falk and also commented upon, following her work, by Ginzburg, Agamben turns our attention to two figures, 3mm high in the original image, standing beside the church. These are plague doctors, wearing their characteristic birdlike beaked masks. Both Agamben and Ginzburg point us towards the affinity between civil war (*stásis*) and epidemic which Hobbes had encountered and emphasised in his 1629 translation of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* (whose frontispiece also includes a

<sup>34</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*, trans. Nicholas Heron (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. ix.

<sup>35</sup> Magnus Kristiansson and Johan Tralau, ‘Hobbes’s hidden monster: A new interpretation of the frontispiece of *Leviathan*’, *European Journal of Political Theory* 13(3) (2014): pp. 299–320.

telling image of democracy as dissension; Hobbes himself was proud of having drawn the map himself). In the Second Book, Chapter 53, Hobbes translates Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague as follows:

*And the great licentiousness ... began at first from this disease. For that which a man before would dissemble and not acknowledge to be done from voluptuousness, he durst now do freely, seeing before his eyes such quick revolution, of the rich dying and men worth nothing inheriting their estates. ... Neither the fear of the gods nor laws of men awed any man.*

This arresting image of the world upside down, stripped of law, is echoed in the famous passages in the Third Book, Chapter 82, on the *stásis* in Corcyra.

*The cities therefore being now in sedition and those that fell into it later having heard what had been done in the former, they far exceeded the same in newness of conceit, both for the art of assailing and for the strangeness of their revenges. The received value of names imposed for signification of things was changed into arbitrary. ... A furious suddenness was reputed a point of valour.*

Agamben and Ginzburg alike note the manner in which Thucydides-Hobbes's description of the plague joins *anomia* (translated by Hobbes as 'licentiousness') to *metabole* (here rendered as 'revolution'). Agamben sees the Leviathan's punitive allegory of the body politic as sovereign android as the point of precarious equilibrium in a cyclical movement where *a disunited multitude* generated by civil war (or originarily, by the state of nature) is composed into a *rex populus* which in turn having, so to speak, *evacuated the people into the sovereign*, makes of the multitude under a condition of sovereignty only a *multitudo dissoluta*, ready to tip (back) into civil war.

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The dissolved multitude thus appears as an amorphous mass of the plague-stricken. In Agamben's own words, it is as if, 'the life of the multitude in the profane kingdom is necessarily exposed to the plague of dissolution'.<sup>36</sup> Conversely: 'The people is ... the absolutely present which, as such, can never be present and therefore can only be represented'.<sup>37</sup> The presence of the plague makes the *bio-politi-*

<sup>36</sup> Agamben, *Stasis*, p. 58.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

cal character of the frontispiece patent, as a symbolic realisation of the central motto of the Hobbesian state (in *De Cive* Ch. 13 and *Leviathan* Ch. 30), recalled by Agamben: *salus populi suprema lex* ('the health of the people is the supreme law'). But, as readers of the volume of *Homo Sacer* that *Stasis* displaced from its position as II.2, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, would know, such a biopolitics is not separable from the state's spectacle of *glory*.

Agamben, curiously, does not really address the manner in which the frontispiece performs the Hobbesian necessity of a 'visible Power to keep [subjects] in awe'. This is instead, at the core of Ginzburg's inquiry, which traces with characteristic nuance, insight and erudition the manner in which the choice of *awe* to translate the Greek verb *apeirgein* (to hold back) – understood as the crucial antidote to the dissolution of the political body – can be traced back to the discussion of religion in a metaphorical travelogue by one of Hobbes's partners in the colonial Virginia Company, Samuel Purchas. Purchas was *criticising* the view of religion as *a continued custome, or a wiser Policie, to hold men in awe* – whereas Hobbes drew the origins of religion precisely from *anxiety* and *perpetuall feare*.

*And they that make little, or no enquiry into the naturall causes of things, yet from the feare that proceeds from the ignorance it selfe, of what it is that hath the power to do them much good or harm, are inclined to suppose, and feign unto themselves several kinds of Powers Invisible; and to stand in awe of their own imaginations.*  
(*Leviathan*, Ch. XI)

Agamben, following Bredekamp, treats the Hobbesian state-fetish as a fundamentally *optical dispositif*. As Bredekamp observes:

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one invaluable source for *Leviathan* is the epic by his poet friend Sir William Davenant, 'Gondibert', which Hobbes compared to the optical technique of the perspective glass. To the extent that the poem developed the *topoi* of civil war and loyalty to a sovereign as fundamental alternatives, it had a similar effect to looking through the perspective glass, according to Hobbes.<sup>38</sup>

In Bredekamp's gloss: 'By optically sacrificing themselves, they form their sovereign.' Following Ginzburg's suggestions, we may want to consider the ways in

<sup>38</sup> Bredekamp, *Stratégies visuelles*, p. 42.



which the *Real Unity* of the Leviathan-sovereign as person is undermined, in a kind of immanent ideology-critique, by this wonderful expression: ‘to stand in awe of their own imaginations’, a phrase that unsettles the key doctrine of *authorisation* in the Leviathan. As Skinner has it, to the extent that subjects ‘have already bound themselves “every man to every man, to Own, and be reputed Author of all, that he that already is their Sovereigne, shall do, and judge fit to be done”. If they cast him off, they will simply fall into the contradiction of authorising and repudiating his actions at one and the same time’.<sup>39</sup> Note also how the verb ‘to feign’ carries across from the materialist critique of religious awe to the political prescription of the necessary representation of the *populus* in the person of the *rex*. As Hobbes has it in Ch. XVI of Book I of *Leviathan*:

*A person, is he whose words or actions, are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of an other man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether truly or by Fiction. When they are considered as his owne, then is he a Naturall Person: And when they are considered as representing the words and actions of an other, then is he a Feigned or Artificiall person.*

We may suggest then that what joins the biopolitical *ademia* of the Leviathan with the sacred political terror that it is engineered to generate is the very operation of *ideology*, in which subjects do not just *authorise* the sovereign but, so to speak, *stand in awe of their own authorisation*.<sup>40</sup> Contrary to the continuity within a ‘political paradigm of the West’ that Agamben stresses, a consideration of political iconography can bring out the caesura represented by the frontispiece. Skinner suggestively contrasts the frontispiece to the *Eikon Basilike*, the immensely successful apologia for Charles I, allegedly written by the king himself and published on the day of his decapitation, with Hobbes’s frontispiece. By contrast, we can simply focus on the image of the people in the two frontispieces. In the *Eikon Basilikon* it is the ‘natural person’ of the king which is the

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<sup>39</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 164–5.

<sup>40</sup> It is difficult in this respect not to treat the *détournement* of the frontispiece in a later history of ancient Britain, Aylett Sammes’s 1672 *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata*, to represent the ritual of collective immolation in the ‘wicker man’, as a kind of acerbic commentary on the immanent dissolution of the Leviathan, something perhaps even more ironically attested in the eponymous 1973 film, where it is a representative of church and state, a deeply religious cop, who finds his demise inside this pagan artificial person.

object of reverence and respect. As Skinner notes ‘There is no suggestion that the people might have played any role in the instituting of his authority’.<sup>41</sup>

On the contrary, in the explanation of the emblem, we see the people allegorically represented as the waves in the upper left corner crashing against the immobile rock of the sovereign (*furor* / *Irati Populi Rupes immota repello*). Far from being a distant raging, the people make up the *scales* in the Leviathan’s armour. As the doctrine of authorisation suggests, the sovereign is, in a sense, *nothing but its subjects*. That is why we can follow Skinner’s suggestion that the Leviathan is a kind of reactive image, one that takes very seriously the novelty introduced by its republican and revolutionary nemesis: its ‘representation of sovereign power [is] one that visibly embraces rather than defies the revolutionary changes that had taken place’.<sup>42</sup> Ellen and Neal Wood refer to this process as one of *redefinition* and *neutralisation* of the multitude.<sup>43</sup> This is even testified to by the almost identical arrangement of gazes between the frontispiece and the 1651 seal of the Commonwealth (this is reproduced in Skinner, but not commented upon), though *unlike* the arrangement of the gazes in the hand-drawn frontispiece for the *Leviathan* offered to Charles II, in which the awed faces look directly at the king, or for the 1652 French edition of *De Corpore Politico*, where there is actually communication and dissension, as well as social difference, among the component parts.

While civil war may be a threshold of politicisation, Agamben’s over-extension of the Western paradigm of politics tellingly ignores the very revolutionary thought and movement that coursed through the English civil war, interestingly repeating the seeming equation between ancient and modern civil war that Hobbes’s translation of Thucydides intimates. The frontispiece, as machine, monster, android, artifice, which is to say *representative*, allows Agamben to engineer his own *logical time* of politics, breaking out of which can only take a messianic form.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>43</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood and Neal Wood, *A Trumpet of Sedition: Political Theory and the Rise of Capitalism, 1509–1688* (London: Pluto, 1997).

In this regard, we may instead draw greater inspiration from Bredekamp's suggestion that, among other sources, we should see in the frontispiece the effect of the tradition of the *state effigy*, 'created to fill the period of an interregnum with a quasi-active representation of the state'.<sup>44</sup> As he concludes: 'The idea of confronting civil war with a colossal living statue to represent peace as an "artificial eternity" is one of the most radical consequences of Hobbes's attempt to raise the conflict between the passions of the natural state and the artificiality of reason to the level of a political iconography of time'.<sup>45</sup> Behind this lay the idea of the time of war, of *wartime*. Hobbes's state effigy – the state *as* effigy – was there not to vault a passing interim, but to confront a durable state, memorably described by Hobbes in Ch. XIII of *Leviathan*: 'For WARRE, consisteth not in battle onely, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known; and therefore the notion of Time, is to be considered in the nature of Warre; as is in the nature of Weather'. Perhaps Agamben's *iconologia philosophica*, sundering time into the permanent present of representation and the messianic *à-venir*, cannot think this time, a time which is *not* that of the concept but a time of civil war, whose icon might be, as Bredekamp suggests, a melancholy Goyian colossus rather than a Hobbesian one.

### III. Civil Wars in Italy

On May 14, 1977 a demonstration is called in Milan by the extra-parliamentary left, incorporating sundry student and worker collectives in the so-called autonomist galaxy – some close to *Rosso*, the newspaper of the *Autonomia operaia* organizzata that had in Toni Negri its most prominent theorist. The demonstration was in response to the killing – likely by a non-uniformed policeman – of a young woman, Giordiana Masi, at a mass demonstration called by the Radical Party to celebrate the anniversary of the referendum legalizing divorce in Italy. At a certain juncture, a group of autonomists splits off from the main demonstration, heading towards the local prison (which it seems they intended but ultimately desisted from attacking) and eventually comes upon a division of policemen – at which point a number of the demonstrators, previously organised in makeshift combat cells, begin to shoot at the forces of order. A policeman, Antonio Custrà, is killed.

<sup>44</sup> Bredekamp, *Stratégies visuelles*, p. 36.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

This is not the first time the more radical wings of the ‘movement of ’77’ come armed to demonstrations – and indeed the question of mass armed insurrectionary violence is one of the leitmotifs in the literature of the movement, *Rosso* especially – but it is recognised as a watershed, by militants and detractors alike; it is perceived as the moment in which the collective tumult of a movement that was, in some ways, the culmination (but also the mutation) of Italy’s anomalously long ’68, fragmented and gave way to an exponential intensification of armed struggle; in which the targeted kidnaps and assassinations of the Red Brigades, Prima Linea and a galaxy of other smaller formations took over from a mass insurrectionary line for which the armed demonstration was on a continuum with house occupations, proletarian self-defense, industrial sabotage, and the like. Now, this moment was not just recorded, but arguably catalysed by a photograph, published the next day in the *Corriere d’Informazione*, showing a crouched demonstrator shooting at the police.<sup>46</sup> This image now graces the Italian Wikipedia page for the ‘anni di piombo’ (Years of Lead), and has long been recognised as the emblem of the tragic negativity that swallowed up the ‘creative’ dimensions of the ’77 movement (note that in a politically symptomatic iconographic choice, the English counterpart of this page in Wikipedia has an aerial shot of the aftermath of the 1980 bombing of the Bologna train station, an act of indiscriminate terrorism traceable to the collaboration of the Italian deep state and fascist elements).

One of the sources of the iconic becoming of this image was an article published on May 29 by the semiotician Umberto Eco in the weekly *L’Espresso* under the title ‘Una foto’ (A photo). Basing himself on a hypothesis about what we could call the ‘autonomy of the symbolic’, the way in which both political positions and everyday life are, as Eco puts it, ‘filtered ... through “already seen” images’, in which we lived through ‘interposed communication’, he goes on to note that the photo had the effect of both registering and accelerating a process of collective distancing of the broader left vis-à-vis the movement’s extremism. The photo could condense a prior unease and effect a transformation because it produced an image that *broke* with the iconographic tradition of the workers’ movement –

<sup>46</sup> For a reproduction of the photograph, taken by Paolo Pedrizzetti, and a thorough analysis of the multiple depictions of the 14 May 1977 clashes, see Damiano Palano, ‘14 maggio 1977. Una foto in Via De Amicis. L’immagine icona degli anni di piombo quarantuno anni dopo’, *maelstrom*, 14 May 2018. Available at: <<http://www.damianopalano.com/2018/05/14-maggio-1977-una-foto-in-via-de.html>> [accessed 15 June 2018].

an iconography of *collectives* in contexts of oppression or revolt, in which political violence could only be associated with the revolutionary individual in the moment of martyrdom or death (as in the iconic images of Che exposed, Christ-like, by the Bolivian army on a slab, or Robert Capa's image of the dying Spanish Republican soldier). The image of the shooter instead 'did not look like any of the images in which, for four generations, the idea of revolution had come to be emblematised'; this individual anti-hero was no relative, however distant, of the revolutionary hero. His isolation was an echo or symptom of a visual culture which Eco pointedly relates to Clint Eastwood's .44 Magnum in *Dirty Harry* or the lone shooters of American Westerns (more reason for an allergic reaction by a generation for whom these were thoroughly negative figures). Eco concludes that in a society that thinks in and by images the photo was a winning argument; notwithstanding the conditions of its production, even its truthfulness, as soon as it appeared 'its communicative trajectory began: and once again the political and the private were traversed by the webs of the symbolic, which, as it always happens, has demonstrated itself as productive of reality'.

In 2011, a volume was published trying to produce a kind of collective archaeology of this image, and Eco's essay became its critical foil. What several of the authors indicated, especially the two semioticians Paolo Fabbri and Tiziana Migliore, operating on Eco's terrain, is how much that article had itself participated in the construction, the framing of the image as an effective symbol of the collapse of the movement of '77 into nihilistic armed struggle.<sup>47</sup> For Fabbri and Migliore, Eco's extremely cursory description of the image, as one of violent isolation and as the inversion of a left political iconography, is based on an excision of everything that indicates the fact that the shooter was actually part of a collective process – be it the presence of armed and non-armed militants working in solidarity, the visibility of the fleeing demonstrators in the topmost left corner, or political pamphlets strewn on the ground. Eco's article also suffers from an insufficient reflection on the elements making up this icon of civ-

<sup>47</sup> See Paolo Fabbri and Tiziana Migliore, '14 maggio 1977. La sovversione nel mirino', in Sergio Bianchi ed., *Storia di una foto: 14 maggio 1977, Milano, via De Amicis. La costruzione dell'immagine icona degli «anni di piombo». Contesti e retroscene* (Rome: Derive Ap-prodi, 2011), pp. 136–41. Available at: <[www.paolofabbri.it/articoli/14maggio1977.html](http://www.paolofabbri.it/articoli/14maggio1977.html)> [accessed 14 June 2018]. See also Paolo Fabbri and Tiziana Migliore, 'Col senno di poi. Intorno a "14 maggio 1977. La sovversione nel mirino"', in: *E/C, rivista on-line*. Available at: <[www.paolofabbri.it/articoli/sennodipoi.html](http://www.paolofabbri.it/articoli/sennodipoi.html)> [accessed 14 June 2018].

il war, among them the necessary but invisible presence of the opponent (the police) off-screen, but also the Meninas-like *mise en abyme* of the image by the presence of a photographer on the opposite pavement, shooting both the shooter and the photographer (thus creating, as Fabbri and Migliore note, a ‘spatial chiasmus’ between the shooter-police axis left-to-right and the two photographers). As well as applying a Greimasian semiotic lens to criticise Eco, Fabbri and Migliore also bring to bear the other images of the demonstration (some of which, kept hidden by one of the photographers more sympathetic to the demonstrators, would later serve as evidence in a conviction – the shot that killed the policeman turns out not to have been fired by the shooter in the image). We could also note how political violence and a collective or group iconography were not disjoined in many images of the time, be it in the photograph of the masked and armed high-school students which graced the cover of *L’Espresso* the week before Eco’s article, or the picture of the two armed autonomists Paolo and Daddo helping each other after having been shot by the police in an anti-fascist demonstration earlier that year, or, indeed, the way in which the infamous P38, the gun that came to symbolise the armed drift of the movement, was incorporated into a recognisably collective icon in a famous cover of the newspaper *Rosso* under the heading ‘You’ve paid dearly, but you haven’t paid for everything’ (*Avete pagato caro, non avete pagato tutto*).

Eliding these less simply legible images – not to mention the ones of police violence, the bodies of dead demonstrators, or indeed the police shooters likely behind the death of Giorgia Masi (in a famous photograph by Tano D’Amico) – and ‘cropping’ his discourse on a photo, which thus becomes *the* photo of the *anni di piombo*, Eco’s framing effectively re-framed the photo, to the point that it is now very often reproduced with the shooter in full isolation from the demonstration from which he emerged. The winning or functioning argument was not so much the photo’s own, but Eco’s (as Maurizio Lazzarato’s critique of the latter noted, the symbolic always requires a whole machinic assemblage of enunciation<sup>48</sup>). But I want to dwell on Fabbri and Migliore’s astute reflection on political icons, because it takes us further into a critical reflection on the potentialities of political iconography:

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<sup>48</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Storia di una foto’, in: Lanfranco Caminiti and Sergio Bianchi eds., *Gli autonomi – volume III* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2008).

The effect obtained by great Icons, and especially the Symbols of an epoch or given culture, is opacity. A snapshot – dynamic and intricate in itself – in becoming symbol becomes static and compact. The image transmuted into the condition of symbol slides from its concrete occurrence, which implied density, by way of the survival of things within the sign, into abstraction, which dissipates them. It circulates so much, and is so often reproduced, that consumption vanquishes meaning: it seals its contents, determines a passage from ‘species’ to ‘genera’ which makes it ‘vague’, and wears it away.

Or, as Girolamo de Michele notes, in a review of *Storia di una foto*, ‘it is the potential representation of any represented whatever: it seems built on purpose to become a photo-symbol’.<sup>49</sup>

These critical notes on the genesis of the icon of Italy’s creeping social and civil war of the 1970s and early 1980s can also lead to a more positive conclusion, one which in a way ties back to Carlo Ginzburg’s methodological approach – namely, to put it briefly, that only *inquiry* (a term whose political valence was incidentally crucial to the Italian Marxism of the 60s and 70s) can overcome the limits, the instrumentalisable mythic opacity and vagueness of the *icon*. This inquiry, in the Italian case, took, among other forms, a specifically filmic guise. In 1970, as part of Committee of Filmmakers Against Repression the great director Elio Petri produced a short film (which was joined with Nelo Risi’s Giuseppe Pinelli), *Tre ipotesi sulla morte di Pinelli*, in which Gian Maria Volonté and three other actors, in a kind of Brechtian counter-investigation, dramatized the implausibility of the official accounts of the ‘accidental’ death of the anarchist initially framed for the bombing of the Bank of Agriculture in Piazza Fontana in 1969 (a product of the state-led ‘strategy of tension’ which reacted to the worker and student insurgencies of the Italian ’68 and conditioned the climate of violence of the ensuing years).<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Girolamo de Michele, ‘Sotto ogni foto c’è una didascalia’, *Carmilla*, 12 May 2011, <[www.carmillaonline.com/2011/05/12/sotto-ogni-foto-c-una-didascalia](http://www.carmillaonline.com/2011/05/12/sotto-ogni-foto-c-una-didascalia)> [accessed 14 June 2018].

<sup>50</sup> Petri’s short film is available here: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8D9qmofQ\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8D9qmofQ_Y)> [accessed 14 June 2018]. Ginzburg himself provided a crucial inquiry into Italy’s own creeping civil war in a study where his long experience of reading mediaeval inquisition trials was brought to bear on the dismantling of the prosecution’s case against his friend Adriano Sofri. See Carlo Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian: Marginal Notes on a Late Twentieth-Century Miscarriage of Justice* (London: Verso, 2002). Sofri, former leader of

In 1972, Pier Paolo Pasolini collaborated with Lotta Continua on a filmic montage of struggle and inquiry, under the title *12 Dicembre* (December 12, after the date of the Piazza Fontana bombing),<sup>51</sup> which combined a counter-forensic element – interviews with witnesses discrediting the official police version – with a set of reports of the insurrections that marked that period, from the strikers of Bagnoli to the uprising in Reggio Calabria (under the heading ‘images of a civil war later disavowed’). Notwithstanding the uneven, conflicted character of the film (a product of Pasolini’s fraught relation with the movement of ’68 and the extra-parliamentary left), it is a striking document of how one could try to hold together the cognitive or forensic moment of counter-information with a kind of poetics of the gestures of revolt but also those of submission – marked in *12 Dicembre* by the counterpoint between the mistrustful shrugs of people in Milan being asked about who might be responsible for the Piazza Fontana bombings and the eloquently inarticulate anger of a disabled worker. Though it could be critically argued that in Pasolini – to hearken back to Didi-Huberman’s arguments on tragic knowledge – the *pathei*, the suffering often overwhelms the *mathos*, the knowledge, in *12 Dicembre* we have a rare effort at the montage, the constellation of two dimensions of the political image – the cognitive and the expressive – that cannot be sundered without collapsing either into opacity or indifference.

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Lotta Continua, was indicted for the assassination of Luigi Calabresi, the police inspector widely perceived as responsible for the death of Pinelli, and target of a sustained negative campaign by Lotta Continua’s newspaper, which famously christened him ‘Inspector Window’. Ginzburg’s book was the occasion for a compelling documentary by Jean-Louis Comolli, *L’affaire Sofri*, 2001.

<sup>51</sup> The film was re-released as a DVD by NDA Press in 2011, accompanied by a booklet edited by the former leader of Lotta Continua, Adriano Sofri. Available at: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXSri6amiMI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXSri6amiMI)> [accessed 14 June 2018].